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'Panel Seeks to Determine if CIA Agents Concealed Superiors' Role With Contras

By JOHN WALCOTT

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—Congressional investigators are trying to determine whether top Central Intelligence Agency officials approved aiding Nicaraguan rebels and whether some field officers are protecting their superiors by claiming they acted on their own.

New CIA Director William Webster, long regarded as a law-and-order man, faces a difficult choice between purging top officials linked to the Iran-Contra scandal and trying to maintain stability at the intelligence agency. If investigators find that the CIA has tried to conceal top officials' involvement in the secret Contra-aid network, the new CIA director could have little choice but to order a major housecleaning, congressional and intelligence officials said.

This week, the former station chief in Costa Rica, who used the pseudonym Tomas Castillo, will be the first of several CIA officers to testify before the House-Senate committee investigating the Iran-Contra affair.

Intelligence sources said the former station chief, along with the top CIA officer in Honduras, the chief of a CIA base at Aguacate, Honduras, and other CIA field officers helped provide arms, training and other aid to the Contras during the two-year period when Congress barred U.S. military aid to the insurgents. The sources said the chief of the base at Aguacate, the site of a major Contra air base, used a CIA helicopter more than eight times to deliver munitions and other supplies for the insurgents.

Earlier this year, the station chief in Costa Rica first denied aiding the Nicaraguan rebels. He then told colleagues and friends he believed his efforts to support the Contras had been authorized by the late CIA Director William Casey. The station chief said he had reported his activities to Mr. Casey through Clair George, CIA deputy director of operations.

At the time, the station chief said the head of CIA operations in Latin America and the head of the agency's Central America Task Force also knew he was helping coordinate supply flights to Contra forces in southern Nicaragua.

The Costa Rica station chief, who has been recalled to Washington, was scheduled to take early retirement last month, after the CIA inspector general recommended that he and other officers be disciplined for their role in aiding the Contras. However, he remains on the agency payroll after changing his story again and claiming he acted on his own.

The chief of the CIA base at Aguacate, the sources said, has admitted helping the Contras but has claimed he had nothing to do with the secret aid network run by fired National Security Council aide Lt. Col. Oliver North. A CIA official said the two officers remain on administrative leave because special counsel Lawrence Walsh has asked the agency not to act until a grand jury is finished investigating the CIA's role in the Iran-Contra case.

CIA spokesman George Lauder said no high-ranking officials approved any activities that violated congressional restrictions on Contra aid. He stressed that the agency has provided documents and worked out arrangements for CIA officers to testify before congressional committees.

Meanwhile, Sen. David Boren (D., Okla.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and a member of the Senate panel investigating the Iran-Contra affair, said this week that there is no evidence of a CIA policy to assist the Contra arms network.

Despite the Costa Rica station chief's assertion that he acted alone, intelligence sources said that strict CIA and congressional procedures for monitoring covert activities in Central America made it nearly impossible for CIA officers to aid the Contras without the knowledge of their superiors. Moreover, the sources said, the CIA base chief in Aguacate has a reputation as a cautious, prudent officer, not a free-lancer.

"It's inconceivable to me that anybody was helping the Contras on his own, without his superiors knowing exactly what he was doing," said one intelligence source.

For example, at Aguacate, the CIA constantly audited the fuel consumption and the number of hours flown by the agency's unmarked Bell UH-1H helicopter, intelligence sources said. They also said that the station chief in Honduras's capital, Tegucigalpa, was notified every time the helicopter was deployed. Other sources said the CIA helicopter was used to deliver food and medicine to the Contras, and sometimes carried munitions when space was available.

Intelligence sources said there was no confusion about the restrictions on CIA aid to the insurgents. The Central America Task Force was assigned its own lawyer in 1984, and Mr. Casey sent CIA officers in Central America written orders to abide by congressional restrictions on aid to the Contras, the sources said. Also, they said, the CIA officers were summoned to meetings where the Task Force's "compliance officer" explained the restrictions in detail.

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Following paragraph appeared in local edition.

Already, the CIA's top terrorism analyst, Charles Allen, will leave his post at the end of the summer for a job teaching at the National War College, administration officials said. Mr. Allen had an important role in the administration's efforts to free U.S. hostages in Lebanon that involved selling arms to Iran. Some profits from those sales were used to aid the Contras.

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